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The Drawbacks of Standardized Testing

Standardized tests are said to be the “key way to improve education” throughout the United States. These test are unlike any other since children and teens, statewide or nationwide, all take them under controlled, specific conditions – where, when, how, and how long the students have to complete the questions and prompts. Some of the standardized tests taken are the PSSAs, the PSATs, the SATS, and the ACTS. Many students feel stressed when taking these tests; however what most people do not realize is that standardized testing is only one measure of the entire education process. Can standardized tests really give full, complete results on how well-educated a student is? I believe they cannot. Since standardized testing is timed, I feel many students can not accurately express their knowledge because the limited timeframe creates an artificial, high-pressure environment for the test.

In the United States, standardized testing began in the early 1900s as a means of testing the intelligence of individuals. In WWI, these tests were used to determine who was able to become an officer, and who was not. Later, standardized testing was used to identify students who were “college worthy.” Today, there are two basic kinds of standardized tests used in the field of education, those that test how well a school education system is performing, such as the PSSAs, and ones that test a student’s individual knowledge and aptitude, such as the SATS, the PSATs, and the ACTs. I have been taking standardized tests since grade school. When I was younger, standardized testing did not mean very much to me; I did not see them any different than any other test. As I got older, these tests became much more serious and important. High school was the first time I stressed over taking a standardized test – the SATs. I was never prepared or taught how to write a well-written, insightful essay in twenty minutes or to solve math problems in such short periods of time. In school, I have always had lots time to do my work and the SAT prep class did not provide me with strategies to work successfully within the time limits of the SAT.

Everyone knows that the purpose of having a school is for teachers to teach, and for students to learn. Without standardized tests, it would be difficult to evaluate schools and school districts just by comparing the grades of the students. Standardized tests are created to measure how well students have been educated according to the standards of a common curriculum are able to understand content and have skills above a minimal level. Supporters of standardized testing claim it is the best method of comparing student performance among different education systems.

Opponents of standardized testing offer a wide range of arguments against over-relying on such tests to evaluate the U.S. education system and its students. The claim that noninstructional factors usually explain the varied test scores when schools or districts are compared. The number of parents living at home, parents’ educational background, type of community, and poverty rate all account for 89 percent of differences in states scores. In addition, norm-referenced tests are not meant to measure the quality of learning or teaching; the purpose of these tests is to rank, not to rate. Standardized test results have also been positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning as they tend to measure only temporally facts and skills rather than a more genuine understand. Yet, despite these weaknesses, the results of these tests are sometimes used as the basis for important decisions, such as graduation and grade promotion. I do not think a single test should be the deciding factor in these cases because it is just one measure of the education process. Another unattended consequence of the current emphasis on standardized testing is that the focus on preparing for such testing takes time and resources away from other areas of study. As a result, schools throughout the United States are reducing the programs in the arts, recess for children, electives for high schoolers, etc.

It seems there are better alternatives than standardized testing for evaluating the U.S education system. One possibility is the portfolio-based assessment. This idea consists of gathering work the students have done throughout the year, having students self-assess their work and their learning process and having teachers also evaluate the work. In the process, students can really think about what they have learned as well as how they have learned – which is the true goal of education. Another worthwhile alternative to standardized testing is to combine portfolio-based assessment with performance exams – which most often are projects such as writing an essay, conducting a science experiment, or making an oral presentation – and standardized tests. This combination would provide a much more accurate and detailed evaluation of students than standardized tests alone.

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